

THE BANNER SERIES OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

A Change of Profession

By HARVEY J. O'HIGGINS

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looked down there through the smoke, at the flames in the roof of an adjoining clothing house, twelve stories below them.

Captain Ball had followed them. "Turn on your water," he yelled above the storm to the men behind them; and in a moment a feeble stream swelled the line of hose and gushed from the "pipe." He swore at it. "It can't spit past its chin," he said.

It strengthened slowly as they watched it. "Keep wettin' her down," he shouted in Gorman's ear. "Get up another line," he cried to the rest of the crew.

The rushing of the wind drowned their answer, but they hurried below to obey him. He remained with Gorman and Hanrahan, watching the fire spread and brighten in the roof of the clothing house. Gorman was still grinning at his "Can't spit past its chin."

They were 200 feet above the street level, and the storm, hurling itself across the huddled roofs below them, drew up a draft of heat and smoke to them, as if they were looking down a chimney. They could guess what the heat must be in the street, for across the roof the woodwork of the windows of a five-story building had caught fire without the touch of any flame, and a pigmy crew were drenching it with a stream which they shot up straight from the sidewalk. Officers, the size of mannikins, ran up and down in the ruddy glow, waving their little arms. The fire flowed over the roof as if it were a burning oil; and the smoke came up to them thicker, and the heat more stifling, with every breath.

Their weak stream dribbled down the wall, to dry out on the hot bricks before it touched the point of danger;



—“Beating With His Heels on Its Sides, and Saying Crazy Nothings in the Voice of Insanity.”

and Gorman leaned over the parapet to see that the paint was beginning to peel off in great scales far below. Hanrahan and he tried hopelessly to reach these by swinging the pipe from side to side. They might as well have tried to irrigate a desert with it. Their eyes were dry and beginning to smart.

The rest of the crew came up again, dragging a second line.

Captain Ball turned to the Lieutenant. "No use bringin' more lines up here," he shouted. "Windows'll be breakin'. There ain't a shutter on the whole blamed buildin'. Fireproof! She's matchwood! Back down to the twelfth floor. Get lines stretched to the air shaft there!" The men went back with their hose.

"Do the best you can up here," he advised Gorman. "Chief's orders to wet her down. Look out for the air shaft."

Gorman caught the first of these instructions, but the wind carried away that last warning of danger, and the captain turned and left the two men unconscious of the catastrophe which was preparing for them.

The air shaft, in fact, was acting as a sheltered flue for the flames. It cut a deep groove into the wall of the Mansard Building at Gorman's left; and the wind, rushing into it, rose straight aloft, blowing up sparks like the draft of a blast furnace. Gorman, watching only the wall and the windows below him, pitied the crews at work in the street. He was wishing for a quid of chewing to-

bacco, and he remembered with exasperation that Hanrahan would have none.

That was one of Hanrahan's social limitations—he did not chew. He had been nicknamed "Delicate Pete" by his fellow-probationers at Fire Headquarters, and Gorman—who was known as "Bull" Gorman, being the big man of his class—had despised him from the day that the instructor, having pitted them against each other in a race with scaling ladders, had then publicly compared Gorman to a baby hippopotamus in point of nimbleness, because Hanrahan had run away from him.

These two were being "broken" together with all the hard work of the company, but there was no friendship between them. They rarely spoke to each other; for Gorman had found Hanrahan's conversation all "hot air and free silver," and had quarreled with him about this wearisome enthusiasm for politics. They continued stolidly at their work now, in the silence of mutual indifference. The growing strength of the stream threatened to tear the nozzle from their hands, and they raised the hose to their shoulders to bend it in a swan's neck arch, that sent the water hissing down the bricks.

They were busied so, when they saw a bluish-green flame flash in the red of the fire in the roof below, and a belch of smoke rolled up to them on the burst and echo of an explosion. Before it reached them, they heard another roar beneath it; the cloud of smoke was split with flame, and they leaped back from the parapet as if from the crater of a volcano, and threw themselves on their faces, as the burning gases, freed by the collapse of the roof—flaring 200 feet in the air and lapping up the side of the Mansard Building, to break every window glass in its upper ten stories and ignite every window curtain, window sash and "trim" in its north wall—rolled over them in a heat that nipped their ears like a frost bite, and was gone.

Gorman pinned down the pipe that was thrashing about on the roof, and staggered back to the parapet with it. The heat of heat was unendurable, and he could see nothing for the smoke that blinded him with tears. He did not know that the gale was carrying a solid tongue of fire into the hidden air shaft, and that every window on that shaft was already spitting flames. He could just see that the woodwork of the window below him was afire, and he called Hanrahan to train the pipe on it with him. They doused it black at once, and scattered the smoke, to see another blaze below. Then, suddenly, the stream from their hose weakened and fell short. It was plain that the crews were using the water on the lower floors.

"We're wanted down below, I guess," Hanrahan said. "We're no good up here now."



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ing from it; and flame was behind the smoke. Gorman ran back to the hose, turned the neck guard of the helmet over his face, and, with the water to open the way for him, fought down three steps into a blaze that could not be faced. The wind, blowing in the broken windows of the air shaft, brought up a smother of heat and smoke against which his pipe was useless. He was fighting a prairie fire with the stream of an extinguisher.

Hanrahan pitched forward on his shoulders. Gorman braced himself against the weight, turned to catch him under the armpits, and carried him up, himself half auto-cated, to lay him on the roof. They were greeted by the fierce purring of the flames. Hanrahan groaned.

"Y' all right?" Gorman asked him.

He rolled his eyes. "Let's get down out of this," he gasped.

Gorman straightened up and looked around him. The doorway was the only entrance to the roof. He walked back to kick the useless hose down the staircase and shut the tin-sheathed door on the blaze below. He went to the stone railing that surmounted the cornice on the front of the building. The coping overhung the lower windows in a sheer drop to the street. He hurried to the south wall. The windows there were twelve feet down, and there was no pipe—no foothold. He went to the back of the roof and found another coping.

He turned to see Hanrahan running from parapet to parapet, now hidden in a cloud of whirling smoke, now black in the red glow of wind-blown flames. He saw him lean over the marble railing that surmounted the cornice on the front of the building, and put his hands in a trumpet to his mouth; the voice was lost in the roar of the wind. He saw him take off his helmet and try to throw it down into the street; and the gale snatched it from his hand, tossed it aloft and blew it away to the south with the smoke and the flying embers.

He came running back to Gorman. "Let's get down," he panted. "Let's get down."

Gorman did not answer him.

"For the Lord's sake, Bull," he cried, "don't let us burn alive up here."

Gorman shook his head. "I can't get down," he said. He could see that there was nothing on the brick roof to burn; the heat and not the flames would be their danger. The fire was at its worst in the light well, and at the point farthest from it there was an enormous water tank, protected with a covering of tin and supported across the angle of the walls on steel beams, so that, even if the roof should fall, the tank would not go with it. Here was the greatest safety. They would have water to prevent the heat from baking them alive, and they would have the tank to shelter them from the drift of smoke.

Gorman went over to it and crouched to peer beneath the beams. Hanrahan stumbled against him. "Bull," he whimpered. "I can't—I can't get down."

Gorman thrust him aside. "Well, who said you could?" he snarled. "You're up here to stay. You better make up yer mind to that an' shut yer yap."

Hanrahan threw up his arms and screamed at the sky in a high, dry voice, clutching with his fingers and snapping like a dog with his teeth. Then he pitched forward into the smoke on a run for the street parapet again.

Gorman climbed slowly up the iron ladder to the top of the tank. He came on a scuttle there, and raised it, to find that the tank was almost full. He took off his rubber coat and dipped it down, and it came up dripping. He rubbed it over his face, and licked at the moisture on the smooth tarpaulin; and the touch of water sent a burning fever flush of thirst through him. He reached down with his helmet, drew it up half full and emptied it over his head and down his back, again and again. Then he drank in great gulps, sighing with satisfaction.

The relief brought back his energies. The tank ladder took his eye, and it occurred to him that, if he could get it loose, he might be able to reach a lower window with it. He took hold of it in his huge hands, drew a long breath, and strained to wrench it from its iron sockets, tightening on it slowly, until the blood drummed in his ears. He bent the upright of it, but the socket held it still. When he paused for breath, he remembered Hanrahan, and shouted to him for aid.

He got no answer, and he descended to the roof to find him lying on his face in the worst of the heat that blew from the air shaft. He dragged him back from it, and emptied a helmet full of water on his face.

Hanrahan rolled his head from side to side, muttering to himself.

"Say," Gorman said. "Say, look-a-here—"

He opened staring eyes, moving his lips in a whisper. "Better get up to the tank an' take a dip. I want you to help me get that ladder loose."

Hanrahan slipped an arm around his neck, raising himself on his elbow. "Get me down out of this, Bull," he whispered. "Get me down out of this, an' I'll make it good. I got a pull. I got a promise—"

Gorman threw off his arm. "Stop talkin' foolish. I can't get you down, man. Here, take a drink."

Hanrahan caught at his collar, thrusting aside the water. "Get me down," he said. "You get me down, Bull, I'll make it good. I'm right in with the Gang. Dorgan said—"

Gorman threw him from him with a curse. "I can't get you down," he yelled at him. "What's the matter with you?"

Hanrahan fell back heavily, and lay breathing hard, with open mouth. A puff of smoke blew down and choked him with a sob.

Gorman dragged him across the roof to the tank, and sat down beside him—uncertain what to do—with his back to the parapet and his face to the light well. The heat swam over them in a suffocating current. Hanrahan threw out his arms and lay as if stretched on a cross, rolling his head from side to side, agonized and speechless.

He began to mumble the "confession" of a Roman Catholic, beating his breast with a whispered "through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."

Gorman scowled. The smoke irritated him; the heat pricked him. "Can't you shut yer yap for half a minute," he complained.

Hanrahan groaned and turned to him. "D'you think there's any hell?" he asked in a husky whisper.

Gorman laughed. "Aw, cut it out," he said. "You're scared. That's all that's wrong with you."

There was a crash of breaking windows in the air shaft. The flames roared up, flapping like a banner in the wind.

"Help!" Hanrahan screamed. "Help! Help!"

Gorman clapped a hand over his mouth. "Well, you lobster," he said.

"Aw, don't Bull," he pleaded. "Don't!"

Gorman stood up in the thickening smoke and looked down on him. "Say," he said, "if you got any breath to waste, you'd better save it for yer prayers. This roof's goin' to drop you in a hole so hot it won't leave enough of you for the devil to raise a blister on. Shut up, will you?"

He turned away from him and climbed the ladder to the top of the tank, so that he might sit down there in quiet. He could hear the engines in the street whirling frantically for coal from the fuel wagons; and they sounded very far away. He reached down into the scuttle and drank from his helmet again. The air came up



"Hanrahan Threw Up His Arms and Screamed at the Sky in a High, Dry Voice."

He turned back with Gorman to the front of the tank again. There was a lull in the wind; the smoke and the flames rose up straight on two sides of the roof, and the bricks were hot under their feet. There was no escape now.

"We got one chance left," Gorman said. "We can get in the tank."

Hanrahan shook his head. "No use, Bull," he answered. "I got to cash in, I guess."

Gorman cursed him. "Well, I ain't," he said. "Get a hold of this ladder."

He braced himself, with a foot against the tin covering of the tank, bent his back and tugged to loosen the ladder from its fastenings. Hanrahan helped him. They strained and struggled with all the strength of every muscle, and the great screws in the sockets of the uprights came out slowly, as if they had been sunk in wax. Once having loosened its hold, they levered the ladder, twisted it and wrenched it free. Gorman crawled under the steel beams and turned off the stop-cock there. Then they both climbed aloft, lowered the ladder into the tank and slid down, one on each side of the rungs, into the water. They drank together, sunk to the teeth.

Gorman ducked. "You'd better tie yourself on," he spluttered. "We'll be eating smoke here before long."

The scuttle was a red square of light above them, and they could see each other's faces as pale blurs of no recognizable feature in the darkness. They stripped off their upper clothing, and bound themselves under their arms to the ladder.

They could hear the crackle and roar of flames outside. There was a pecking of scattered rain on the tin above them.

"I wish I had somethin' to eat," Gorman said.

Hanrahan sighed again. "I'd like something to breathe better."

He was choking with heat and smoke. He rested his chin on the rung of the ladder. He was tired and dizzy. He seemed to be drifting on clouds of smoke, blown about in storm and heat, a glowing spark above the flames. His mind wandered in a delirium of suffocation. He heard Gorman's voice, at a great distance, say, "Wind changed—south."

Daybreak found the "fireproof" Mansard Building a smoking and blackened shell above its tenth story, with the firemen putting out the last smoulder in the gutted rooms. They fought their way up slowly from floor to floor, until by noon Captain Ball and a squad of his company, looking for their dead, reached the stairs leading to the roof.

They found there the blackened nozzle which Gorman had abandoned to the fire. They went up the stairs, hopelessly, and burst open the door, to see Gorman himself—red-eyed and dripping, and stripped to the waist—sitting on the edge of the tank, beating with his heels on its sides, and singing crazy nothings in the voice of insanity.

Captain Ball went over to him and called up, "Where's Hanrahan?"

He winked and pointed down into the tank. "I'm the king of the castle," he sang. "I'm the king of the castle. I'm the king—what's Hanrahan? Pete, Pete, Delicate Pete! Oh! he's a spellbinder," he said with a grin. "He's a spellbinder, talkin' hot air. Comin' up? Come on up. It ain't as hot up here as it was."

And they found Hanrahan, unconscious but alive, still tied to the ladder and floating with his head between the rungs.

Two weeks later, when Gorman reported for duty at the engine house, his first question was for "Delicate Pete." "Him?" the Lieutenant said. "Oh, he's quit the department. He's goin' to join the police."

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